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SUBJECT: CONGOLESE MEDIA AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THEY OPERATE; PART ONE IN A SERIES ON THE DRC'S 4TH ESTATE

REF: (A) Kinshasa 448; (B) Kinshasa 969;
(C) Kinshasa 1044

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11. (SBU) Summary: The media environment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is unusually problematic and complicated, even by African standards. This is the first in a series of reports on the DRC press and mass media designed to help USG readers better understand the constraints and challenges we face as we in the field endeavor to promote freedom of the press and to identify opportunities for capacity building and professional and ethical training for Congolese journalists. This goal becomes more urgent as the nation prepares for local and national elections in 2011. This installment provides background data and focuses on political, economic and cultural constraints to a more meaningful application of press freedom. End summary.

Background

12. (SBU) The DRC has 10 daily newspapers (all published in Kinshasa), 82 television stations, and some 280 radio stations. Due to the diversity of the media, the country's physical size, cultural and linguistic differences, as well as a severe lack of development and technological infrastructure, the DRC is a challenging environment in which to communicate with the public. More than 65 million people are spread across nearly 1.5 million square miles (lack of an official census means much demographic data are estimates). French is the official language, and there are four officially recognized indigenous languages (Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo and Tshiluba), as well as 250 other languages and dialects. The adult literacy rate is about 65.5 percent in a local language and approximately 30 percent in French. Cell phone usage is common, mostly in the larger cities, with 68 percent of Kinshasa residents having access to a cell phone, and more than 6.5 million cell phone users in the entire country, according to one survey.

13. (SBU) All media are hampered by poor telecommunications and transportation infrastructure. Only one television station and five radio stations broadcast to all eleven provinces, and their signals do not reach the entire population. The DRC does not have a land-line phone system or a functioning postal service. Internet penetration is among the lowest in Africa (0.4 percent) and even where available bandwidth is very low. Surface transportation is extremely limited between major cities. In urban areas, electricity is unreliable, while in rural areas it is often non-existent. There is a severe lack of published reading material. Newspapers and magazine publication is restricted to the capital and a few larger cities, with circulation of the Kinshasa dailies between 500 and 2,000 copies. Paper is imported, and printing costs are prohibitive, particularly in the provinces, leading to a periodical

cover price that most Congolese cannot afford.

Press freedom

¶4. (SBU) In the 1990's, under pressure from the international community, restrictions on the Congolese press were lifted first by Mobutu and then, to a greater degree, by Laurent Kabil. Private radio and television stations emerged, and daily and weekly newspapers began publishing at a rapid rate. Still, both the written and electronic media suffered from official harassment and repression by the GDRC. The military courts and different security forces were particularly hostile to the media and attempted to influence it through intimidation.

¶5. (SBU) Today, the DRC media can be characterized as somewhat free in the sense that there is a broad range of different print and broadcast media, operating with relatively few formal constraints. Article 24 of the 2005 Constitution states: "Every person has the right to information. Freedom of the press, free access to information and broadcasts by radio and television, the printed press and all other means of communication are guaranteed within the limits of the respect of public order, social norms and the rights of others."

Government hostility to press freedom

¶6. (SBU) Despite constitutional guarantees, political and economic pressures severely limit press freedom. While DRC journalists might have statutory rights to freedom of expression, in reality powerful forces compel them to exercise self-censorship or to modify their news reports to please the government or other powerful interests. Freedom House's 2008 Freedom of the Press survey rates the DRC as

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"Not Free," commenting: "Statutes provide for freedom of the press, but the government continues to sharply restrict the work of journalists through a variety of means." These include political pressure, financial incentives, and sometimes intimidation and threats. Specific acts restricting press freedom are pursued by officials at nearly all levels of government, from local police and internal security agents to government ministers. The lack of a properly functioning judicial system, absence of a balance of powers between different branches of government, and widespread corruption render the existing laws concerning press freedom almost meaningless in terms of practical application.

¶7. (SBU) Joseph Kabil's first years as appointed president (2001-2006) saw relative stability in terms of press freedom. Since Kabil's election as president in 2006, however, acts of violence and intimidation against journalists are on the rise, including the murders of four reporters in the past three years, and death threats against many others. While some of these threats are credible, and indeed have been acted upon, others are simply crude attempts at intimidation. The Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (GDRC) has repeatedly said that it takes these threats seriously and is investigating both the previous murders and the new threats. Yet many in the international and journalistic communities believe that, even if the government leadership is not behind the violence and threats, their silence has condoned the behavior. In addition, the GDRC has undertaken several actions to sanction and censor journalists and news organizations. The most dramatic of these acts was cutting off the signal of Radio France International (RFI) throughout the DRC on July 26, 2009 (ref A and previous). Even when such actions are consistent with the law (and this would not seem to be the case when RFI was silenced), they frequently target media that support the opposition, or, as in the case of RFI, are perceived as overly critical of the GDRC, particularly in matters perceived to be related to national security.

¶8. (SBU) On September 29, 2009, Minister of Communications and Media Lambert Mende sent foreign journalists based in the DRC a letter informing them that they were now subject to the military penal code, and exposed to prosecution if their news reports are

determined to be "damaging to military morale." (ref B and previous.) Mende has also made several public statements and even published a "white paper" critical of NGOs reporting on human rights violations. In one press interview, Mende suggested that NGO representatives be accredited as journalists and subjected to the same legal restrictions and professional sanctions as members of the fourth estate. Most of the news reports from the conflict zones in eastern DRC originate from Radio Okapi or human rights NGOs. (Note:

According to a sample study conducted by PAS Kinshasa, 75 percent of news stories about conflict in eastern DRC during the period of one month originated from Radio Okapi, while the rest were provided by NGOs. End note.) Without these sources, there would be little or no news from the conflict zones. Many in the diplomatic, international and journalistic communities fear that is exactly what Qinternational and journalistic communities fear that is exactly what the GDRC wants. On November 27, Mende met with U.S. and other Western diplomats to discuss press freedom, and while Mende did not offer any specifics addressing the diplomats' concerns, his tone and manner was uncharacteristically conciliatory (ref C).

Economic challenges to press freedom

¶9. (SBU) Overall, the economy is under-developed, with annual per capita GDP at \$100 (the dollar is used as an unofficial second currency, alongside the Congolese Franc). The vast majority of economic activity is informal. Salaries in the formal sector are low and frequently in arrears. Journalists often go unpaid, and lack reliable internet access, books and other publications, and training in professional techniques and ethics.

¶10. (SBU) Lack of economic development and diversity render it difficult -- even impossible -- for a business model where news media can rely upon advertising for revenues. And those few companies (mostly in the telecommunications and beverage industries) that can afford advertising support entertainment programming rather than news broadcasts. Paid advertising in the printed press is extremely limited.

¶11. (SBU) The absence of commercial revenue opportunities forces all media to rely on some form of patronage. The GDRC funds (although inadequately) the public television and radio broadcast system known as the Radio Television Nationale Congolaise (RTNC). Private news outlets are financed by political figures and business leaders seeking to influence policy and public opinion. Between

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2004 and 2008, bi-lateral and multi-lateral partners have contributed more than \$60 million to support Congolese media. These funds have gone toward capacity building in training and education of journalists, as well as supporting organizations and institutions concerned with the media. While this participation is vital to encouraging a free and responsible press, it also creates a dependence on outside support that will require transition to sustainability in the near future, particularly with elections planned for 2011. During the last elections, Radio Liberty, owned by opposition candidate and International Criminal Court defendant Jean-Pierre Bemba, was used to incite violence.

¶12. (SBU) The legally mandated minimum wage for a journalist is \$3 per day, for a monthly salary of \$78. Yet, most journalists do not work under contract, and while some media organizations pay their employees regularly, many do not. Unpaid reporters are left to rely on remuneration for story placement, known as "coupage." All those who work in or with the DRC press know about "coupage," and no efforts are made to hide or discourage it. Without the revenues generated by "coupage," many journalistic enterprises could not survive. The standard price is \$50 for a newspaper article or radio emission and \$100 for a television report (more if a full camera crew is required). "Coupage" can be paid either to reporters or editorial directors, and is expected to be shared. Disputes over the distribution of "coupage" are often a source of conflict in the newsroom.

¶13. (SBU) Sometimes "coupage" can become regularized, as journalists are put on retainer by government officials, while

continuing to report on stories in which their patrons are involved. Journalists in the "private" press who enjoy political patronage join their colleagues in the government-run television and radio network RTNC in the ethical netherworld between journalist and press agent. Another consequence of "coupage" is that the editorial line of a press organ can be wildly inconsistent. A newspaper might be harshly critical of an official one day, and publish a "puff piece" the next. In a form of public blackmail, some journalists will write a hatchet job on a public figure in order to get paid for an article that makes amends. Broad knowledge of "coupage" also contributes to public cynicism toward the press. Yet as detrimental as "coupage" is to journalistic objectivity and credibility, no other viable alternative business models presently exist.

¶14. Comment: While enjoying great diversity and certain legal guarantees, the DRC press faces enormous political and economic challenges, which reduce its ability to report the news independently and responsibly. End comment.

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